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Doug Brown

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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions

Doug Brown, Editor



In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

Philip Jacob Spener, ***Pia Desideria or Heartfelt Desire for a God-pleasing Reform of the true Evangelical Church***. Translated by Theodore Tappert. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964. 131 pp.

While Erasmus of Rotterdam spear headed an ethical and devotional reform within the Church, spiritually troubled Martin Luther searched for relief from "the sinner that I am." Lecture assignments at the new Wittenberg University on the Psalms, Hebrews, and Romans occasioned his radical recasting of "justification by faith through grace"—a faith divinely given to sinners by which they gain acceptance before God based on Christ's righteousness forensically at work through crucifixion to completely resolve the sin problem for those who by divine election would be granted to experience of faith.

The reform efforts of Erasmus and Luther overlapped in many ways. However, two key differences blocked any cooperative work for reform. First, Erasmus, a humanist as well as a Christian, regarded transformation of life the litmus test for proving the soundness of doctrine. Luther, to absolutely avoid any regress into ambiguity about a believer's standing before God, rejected this test. Second, Erasmus sought ways to work within the system. Luther felt compelled to take a confrontational approach, eventually challenging the Church's hierarchical control of the sacraments, interpretation, and the

convening of councils. Luther's prophet-like proclamation of justification by faith took root. Philipp Melancthon shouldered the task of systematically clarifying the sweeping theological implications. Walter Bugenhagen provided leadership for the nuts-and-bolts task of resolving decisions about the recasting of being a Christian congregation rallied around this gospel. As a team, these three ministers led the formation of a new and distinct expression of Christianity.

Every movement (including our own) produces a tradition. Every tradition faces the difficult task of retaining that which keeps it a movement. A century later, how had the Lutheran tradition fared?

Philip Spener was born (1635) near Strasbourg to devoutly Lutheran and anti-Roman parents who served a noble family. Having cut his spiritual teeth on such classics as Johannes Arndt's **True Christianity** and Lewis Bayley's **The Practice of Piety**, he spent twelve years with the University of Strasbourg faculty in his successful pursuit of bachelor's, master's, and doctor's degrees in theology. By 1666 he had been appointed senior minister for Frankfort churches. Tireless visitation provided him firsthand insight into a troubling devotional complacency "uniting" laity, clergy, theological faculty, and political leaders. He soon began convening *collegia pietatis* (spirituality meetings) in his home. In 1675 he received an invitation to write the preface to a new edition of Arndt's sermons. The preface drew such interest that the publisher decided to publish

the preface separately under the title **Pia Desideria**. "Pietism" as an historical force within Protestant traditions was (re)born.

Spener divided **Pia Desideria** into three disproportionate parts. Part One entailed a scrutinizing critique of the escalation of accountability, within the hierarchical organization, for the existing malaise. Preachers were responsible for the plight in the pew. Theological faculties, for the preachers. Political leaders, for the appointments to theological faculties. Part Three spelled out specific proposals (e.g., more extensive use of Scripture, the exercise of spiritual priesthood, discipline upon religious controversialists, improved ministerial training, a thorough reformation of preaching) for correcting the way the lives of believers discredited the affirmation of justification through Jesus Christ. The brief but crucial Part Two offered biblical and patristic reasons to remain hopeful that devotional and ethical reform could occur.

Since introducing "Classics and Christian Devotion" to the Harding University Graduate School's curriculum a decade ago, I have included **Pia Desideria**. Invariable, students respond to the work with some version of the definition of a classic—a work that seems to have been written out of the experience of the reader. Students are clearly (overly) prepared to transpose Spener's critique and location of accountability into a description of Churches of Christ (though they tend not to have Spener's healthy

habit of using first-person pronouns). They can spur on a conversation of what they would propose to do if given the chance. However, they stumble on Part Two, betraying their oversight of the need to justify the effort to promote change. We all know ministers whose work is brief or enduring, self-righteous or humble, cynical or constructive. Medication on Part Two may focus on what makes the difference.

I recommend that **Pia Desideria** be (re)read by every minister and teacher cognizant of serious spiritual shortcomings within Churches of Christ. Permit me to close this review with a selection from a sermon Spener preached in 1669:

How much good it would do if good friends would come together on a Sunday and instead of getting out glasses, cards, or dice would take up a book and read from it for the edification of all or would review something from sermons that were heard! If they would speak with one another about the divine mysteries, and the one who received most from God would try to instruct his weaker brethren! If this should happen, how much evil would be held in abeyance, and how the blessed Sunday would be sanctified for the great edification and marked benefit of all!